



India's damned generation: young go hungry despite economic boom

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As many as 3,000 children die every day in India as a result of malnutrition

India is condemning another generation to brain damage, poor education and early death by failing to meet its targets for tackling the malnutrition that affects almost half of its children, a study backed by the British Government concluded yesterday.

The country is an "economic powerhouse but a nutritional weakling", said the report by the British-based Institute of Development Studies (IDS), which incorporated papers by more than 20 India analysts. It said that despite India's recent economic boom, at least 46 per cent of children up to the age of 3 still suffer from malnutrition, making the country home to a third of the world's malnourished children. The UN defines malnutrition as a state in which an individual can no longer maintain natural bodily capacities such as growth, pregnancy, lactation, learning abilities, physical work and resisting and recovering from disease.

In 2001, India committed to the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving its number of hungry by 2015. China has already met its target. India, though, will not meet its goal until 2043, based on its current rate of progress, the IDS report concluded.

"It's the contrast between India's fantastic economic growth and its persistent malnutrition which is so shocking," Lawrence Haddad, director of the IDS, told *The Times*. He said that an average of 6,000 children died every day in India; 2,000-3,000 of them from malnutrition.

There was no immediate response from the Indian Government. The report highlights its failure to improve basic living standards for most Indians despite presiding over an unprecedented period of economic growth since coming to power in 2004.

The boom has enriched a consumer class of about 50 million people, but an estimated 880 million still live on less than \$2 a day, many of them in conditions worse than those found in sub-Saharan Africa.

Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister, described malnutrition as "a curse that we must remove" in an Independence Day speech last year. Since then his Government has quadrupled funding to tackle the

problem — but the IDS report said that the money would be wasted unless steps were taken to improve governance at every level.

In most developing countries, malnutrition drops as GDP rises, because parents earn more money with which to buy more and better food for their children, according to the report. India's real GDP per capita grew by 3.95 per cent a year from 1980-2005, it said — yet the percentage of underweight children under 3 in India dropped only from 52 to 46 per cent between 1992 and 2006.

The report said one of the main problems was that millions of Indians were unable to hold government officials to account for delivering government feeding programmes, with bureaucrats frequently excluding large groups of individuals — including lower castes and women — from government initiatives.

Another problem not mentioned in the report is that India opposes the import of high-energy food supplements.

The report was part-funded by Britain's Department for International Development (DfID), which will spend £500 million on health and nutrition in India between 2008 and 2012.

"There is no shortage of ideas about what to do to tackle malnutrition," said Michael Anderson, the head of DfID in India. "But leadership from the top and joint action across government are needed to turn these ideas into practical solutions. The challenge is urgent: the lives of millions of children depend on it."

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6837585.ece>